

**Neo-Victorianism and its Popular Pre-Postmodern
Predecessors: Review of Caterina Maria Grasl,
*Oedipal Murders and Nostalgic Resurrection:
The Victorians in Historical Middlebrow Fiction, 1914-1959***

Catherine Paula Han
(University of Southampton, England, UK)

**Caterina Maria Grasl, *Oedipal Murders and Nostalgic Resurrection:
The Victorians in Historical Middlebrow Fiction, 1914-1959*
Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014.
ISBN: 978-3825363420, € 65.00.**

Neo-Victorian scholars will find much to think about in Caterina Maria Grasl's monograph *Oedipal Murders and Nostalgic Resurrections: The Victorians in Historical Middlebrow Fiction, 1914-1959* (2014). A study of middlebrow historical fiction published between 1914 and 1959, it surveys how popular novels from these years "contributed to and were influenced by shifting perceptions of the Victorians, and how their depictions of the period reflect and comment on contemporary issues and concerns" (Grasl 2014: 22). Grasl's scholarship, furthermore, might be concerned with this specific period but its aim is

closely allied to the neo-Victorian novel's [later] project of uncovering hidden voices from the past and challenging historical master narratives – in this case, the by now well-established narrative of Bloomsbury's Oedipal murder of the Victorians, and their nostalgic resurrection during the 1950s. (Grasl 2014: 23)

Neo-Victorian Studies
9:1 (2016)
pp. 187-195



As this statement makes clear, Grasl's monograph makes forays into territory that will interest many neo-Victorian scholars. And indeed, the study considers examples of historical fiction that have been re-examined and reclaimed as neo-Victorian, such as Michael Sadleir's *Fanny by Gaslight* (1944) and Marghanita Laski's *The Victorian Chaise-Longue* (1953) (see Cox 2012).

For this reader, Grasl's study holds particular interest because its concentration on the middlebrow predecessors of neo-Victorian fiction calls attention to emerging issues for neo-Victorian studies. These issues are connected more generally to the literary reputation of historical fiction but also gesture towards current critical debates concerning the cultural evaluation of neo-Victorianism. In the process, *Oedipal Murders and Nostalgic Resurrections* raises several related, rather knotty questions. When, for instance, did neo-Victorianism emerge? Did no earlier examples arise before Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) or John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969)? Do neo-Victorian texts have to be postmodern texts? What distinguishes neo-Victorian fiction from other historical fiction set in the Victorian period? And to what extent does making such distinctions mean that judgements have to be made about neo-Victorianism's literary and cultural value?

Though many in the field have tried to provide answers, their efforts have often dredged up new questions. Many definitions of neo-Victorianism note its characteristic features but also advance half-articulated (disguised, even) assumptions about literary or cultural quality. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, for example, have tried to differentiate between neo-Victorianism and less sophisticated historical fiction set in the same period. They propose that neo-Victorian texts "must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). Yet their widely quoted definition has attracted criticism. For as Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss rightly observe, these types of distinction inadvertently create a neo-Victorian canon that has, in turn, "begun to fossilise the body of works" considered to be neo-Victorian (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014b: 4). They maintain, furthermore, that Heilmann and Llewellyn are implicitly reproducing "the debate about high and low culture by installing the self-reflexive, critical quality of media as a criterion of value" (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss

2014b: 3). I also take the view that Heilmann, Llewellyn and other neo-Victorian critics have tended to discriminate against more obviously escapist, popular or commercial examples of neo-Victorian culture.

Like others, I have been struck by the way that this critical tendency exists in tension with the “general conviction” that neo-Victorianism is “a postmodern phenomenon” (Kohlke 2014: 29). The debate about neo-Victorian fiction’s cultural value contradicts its association with the postmodern “deconstruction of metanarratives such as ‘Culture’, resulting in a breakdown of distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ literature, erudite art and popular culture” (Kohlke 2014: 29). For this reason, I welcome Grasl’s study, because her explicit choice to look at ‘middling’ fiction implies a willingness to draw the type of cultural boundaries only faintly sketched out by much neo-Victorian criticism. Of course, these boundaries are related to subjective taste but also power and authority. Consequently, the field might want to make this matter more transparent. So *Oedipal Murders and Nostalgic Resurrections* offers an opportunity to bring what was – until very recently – an obscured discussion about cultural evaluation out into the open.

Indeed, Grasl’s monograph has the potential to make the field re-examine the premise that neo-Victorianism is a solely postmodern phenomenon. Rather paradoxically, the postmodernism of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and its historiographical metafictional ilk heightened the cultural status of historical fiction. As Cora Kaplan points out, Fowles’s novel enabled the genre to overcome its reputation as “an undemanding staple of middlebrow and lowbrow fiction: mildly salacious novels in costume with a particular appeal to the woman reader” (Kaplan 2007: 89). As mentioned, some of these earlier works of historical fiction have been re-examined and reclaimed as neo-Victorian, throwing neo-Victorianism’s presumed postmodernity into doubt. These literary rediscoveries lay the groundwork for the further expansion or disruption of the neo-Victorian ‘canon’.

Whilst Grasl’s monograph speaks to noteworthy conversations in the field, it frequently shies away from participating. That propensity can be seen from the manner in which she handles the difficult task of defining the middlebrow. It is, like neo-Victorianism, a slippery term. To explain her understanding of the concept, Grasl chooses not to use the insights of cultural sociologists, such as Pierre Bourdieu (who does not even appear in

her bibliography). Instead, she draws on the relatively recent profusion of scholarship on interwar and mid-twentieth-century middlebrow culture. An important voice in this field belongs to Nicola Humble, who argues that “the middlebrow in this period acquires a generic identity of its own – one established through a complex interplay between texts and the desires and self-images of their readers” (Humble 2001: 4-5). Humble’s “broad working definition” posits that the middlebrow novel consciously

straddles the divide between the trashy romance or the thriller on one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other: offering narrative excitement without guilt, and intellectual stimulation without undue effort. (Humble 2001: 11)

Various interconnected factors contributed to the construction of the middlebrow. One of these factors is that middlebrow texts were often unfavourably compared with “the more demanding modernist novels of the period” (Grasl 2014: 14). It is during this time that historical fiction came to be seen as out of step “with the modernist sensibilities of an interwar literary avant-garde” (Kaplan 2007: 89). The first chapter does succeed in giving a thorough, historically anchored explanation of the middlebrow. But after the concept has been introduced, the study neglects to give much consideration to the admittedly fraught matter of cultural evaluation and judgment.

To an extent, my criticism is unfair because Grasl’s argument concerns other matters. As the title of *Oedipal Murders and Nostalgic Resurrections* intimates, one of its key contentions is that a number of writers under the influence of Sigmund Freud choose to “explore the relationship between the Victorians and their own generation in terms of an oedipal conflict” (Grasl 2014: 38). But as the Victorians receded into the temporal distance, Grasl suggests, many middlebrow fictions adopted a more nostalgic attitude towards their nineteenth-century predecessors. Of course, the period of her study has received a lot of attention but most of what has been written relates only to avant-garde, Bloomsbury-dwelling modernists’ responses to the Victorians. In contradistinction to much prior work, Grasl focuses on popular fiction to demonstrate that the period contained a greater multiplicity of responses to the Victorians than usually acknowledged. Overall, she manages to fulfil her stated objective to

“historically and socio-culturally contextualise” these murders and resurrections (Grasl 2014: 362). At the same time, these aims are rather modest and underscore the frequent tentativeness of the monograph’s approach and analysis.

Indicatively, this monograph hints at but does not always pursue its own far-reaching implications for neo-Victorian studies. Although in conversation with the field, Grasl is cautious and avoids actually describing the texts under discussion as ‘neo-Victorian’. Because “neo-Victorian” carries associations with “postmodernism and metatextual self-consciousness”, Grasl’s preferred term is “Victorian-centred fiction” (Grasl 2014: 18). Yet at various points, she discusses the metatextual self-consciousness of, for example, *Fanny by Gaslight* but also lesser-known works like D.L. Murray’s *Trumpeter, Sound!* (1933). In spite of this timidity, she maintains that “Victorian-centred fiction must be regarded as the precursor of these later texts”, before proposing that neo-Victorian studies’ insights “can profitably be extended or adapted to culturally contextualise earlier Victorian-centred texts” (Grasl 2014: 18). Grasl attempts to illustrate how such an extension or adaptation might work in various ways. In particular, the monograph’s later chapters draw on neo-Victorian criticism to point out the similarities between Victorian-centred and neo-Victorian works, especially their shared desire to uncover the ‘hidden’ or ‘marginalised’ Victorians.

Prior to discussing any texts, however, *Oedipal Murders and Nostalgic Resurrections* devotes its first two chapters to laying out its scholarly agenda and contribution, glossing its terms and outlining the theoretical approaches used. To produce its analysis, the study employs a combination of Iserian reader-response aesthetics, cognitive poetics, schema theory and dietic shift theory. Although this theoretical background is exhaustively explained, the monograph could have done more to demonstrate the applicability of its methodology to other scholars.

With its lengthy explanation of its scholarly contribution and methodology, the monograph delays discussing any novels in depth until the third chapter. Entitled ‘The Public Legacy of the Victorians’, the chapter explores the ways in which different novelists cast their imaginations back to the Victorians in order to comment on and better understand their own period. Works considered include Maurice Hewlett’s *Mainwaring* (1920), Doris Leslie’s *Concord in Jeopardy* (1938) and, at most length, Phyllis

Bentley's *Inheritance* (1932). Closely related in argument, the fourth chapter addresses 'The Private Legacy of the Victorians' and surveys how Victorian-centred fiction represents the more personal influence of the Victorians on the twentieth century, particularly in relation to women, family life and the domestic sphere. The chapter revisits some previously discussed texts but also turns its attention to new ones, offering extended analyses of Dorothy Hewlett's *Victorian House* (1939) and Bentley's *Sleep in Peace* (1938). From Grasl's readings, it becomes apparent that these Victorian-centred novels share later neo-Victorian works' frequently prurient interest in Victorian sex and sexuality.

For many neo-Victorian scholars, the most interesting material and ideas are discussed in the fifth chapter, 'Rediscovering the Victorians'. Here, Grasl considers works that feed directly into the on-going debate about the emergence of neo-Victorianism. Like many later neo-Victorian novels, the disparate texts discussed in this chapter are united by an "avowed aim to bring to light the hitherto unknown and unobserved sides of Victorian life, especially those aspects which the Victorians themselves (supposedly) preferred to keep hidden from view" (Grasl 2014: 225). To make this point, Grasl examines works like *Fanny by Gaslight* and Sylvia Townsend Warner's *The Flint Anchor* (1954). Both feature the types of settings or marginalised figures – such as the urban poor, prostitutes or LGBT communities – that recur in later historical fiction with nineteenth-century settings. And like subsequent neo-Victorian works, these Victorian-centred ones expend a great deal of their attention on the sex lives of the Victorians. Grasl even makes this link, identifying both as directing an eroticising and "orientalising" gaze at the Victorians (Grasl 2014: 266), an observation which builds directly on Marie-Luise Kohlke's influential essay on neo-Victorian "sexsation" (Kohlke 2008). Grasl intimates further connections between neo-Victorianism and Victorian-centred fiction by pointing that the earlier works often exhibit a "metatextual dimension" (Grasl 2014: 267). At its end, the chapter posits that the works discussed display many differences but undertake a common mission of "challenging unifying discourses about the period, insisting on the existence of alternative histories and giving a voice to those marginalised by more traditional historiographic and biographic discourse" (Grasl 2014: 299). The parallels with neo-Victorian fiction are obvious.

In contrast to ‘Rediscovering the Victorians’, the sixth chapter, ‘Re-inventing the Victorians’, looks at novels that affirm their readerships’ existing knowledge of and preconceptions about the Victorians. Ultimately, Grasl suggests that these novels recycle stereotypes in a manner that “simplifies and smoothes over the inhomogeneity and complexity of historical reality” (Grasl 2014: 301). The novels discussed in the chapter include Laski’s *The Victorian Chaise-Longue*, Betty Askwith’s *The Blossoming Tree* (1953) and Angela Thirkwell’s *Coronation Summer* (1937). In Grasl’s view, most of these texts are escapist in nature and transform the Victorians into little more than “a historical curiosity to be either disparaged or admired from the ‘safe’ vantage point of the mid-twentieth century” (Grasl 2014: 301). Many of these fictions, Grasl argues, engage with the earlier period in order to uphold a narrative of twentieth-century progress. Even so, the study ends by insisting that “certain trends are discernable” but only “on the basis of highly selective samples”, before disavowing any intention to “chart a linear progression from the Victorians’ Oedipal murder in 1914 or 1918 to their nostalgic resurrection in the 1950s” (Grasl 2014: 361, 362). Such a statement is a frustrating one that throws into relief that this monograph is rather reluctant to present firm conclusions about its material or make a bold argument. This inclination is perhaps one reason why the study acknowledges an overlap with but does not position itself as an explicit intervention in neo-Victorian studies.

In light of its title, I would also observe that *Oedipal Murders and Nostalgic Resurrections* offers a somewhat under-developed discussion of both Freud and nostalgia. Grasl asserts that many writers of Victorian-centred fictions perceived their generation as locked in an “oedipal conflict” with the Victorians and tried to “chart the crippling effects [of] Victorian moral and social codes” (Grasl 2014: 38). In its analysis of this relationship, the monograph never goes much beyond noting evidence of Freud’s influence on these novels. Meanwhile, ‘nostalgia’ lacks the sustained explanation received by other prominent terms (such as ‘Victorian’) and it appears somewhat under-theorised. For instance, this study does not really engage with the vast pool of critical literature on nostalgia (with the exception of the work of David Lowenthal). Another quibble is that a book of this size – for it is a hefty volume – would benefit from an index, especially as its argument refers to so many texts.

Yet *Oedipal Murders and Nostalgic Resurrections* has much to say to this particular field. For neo-Victorian scholars who are interested in expanding, backdating or deconstructing the neo-Victorian ‘canon’, Grasl’s monograph will serve as a useful reference point. As mentioned, the bulk of critical interest has been on ‘highbrow’ modernist authors’ engagement with the Victorians. Comparatively little research exists on how popular, mainstream writers of the same period constructed parallel relationships with their Victorian predecessors. Grasl addresses this lacuna and directs the field’s attention towards some intriguing but overlooked texts. Her monograph does not rewrite the “well-established narrative of Bloomsbury’s Oedipal murder of the Victorians, and their nostalgic resurrection during the 1950s” (Grasl 2014: 23). But it does challenge the linearity of the narrative by identifying some interesting subplots. In the process, Grasl reminds us that each generation not only remakes the ‘Victorians’ but does so across the cultural spectrum in multiple and conflicting ways.

Bibliography

- Boehm-Schnitker, Nadine and Susann Gruss (eds.). *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*. New York & London: Routledge.
- . 2014b. ‘Introduction: Fashioning the Neo-Victorian–Neo-Victorian Fashions’. In Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss (2014a): 1-17.
- Cox, Jessica. 2012. ‘Neo-Victorianism’, in John, Juliet (ed.), *Oxford Bibliographies in Victorian Literature*. DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780199799558-0083 (accessed 30 July 2016).
- Heilmann, Ann and Mark Llewellyn. 2010. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Humble, Nicola. 2001. *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kaplan, Cora. 2007. *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kohlke, Marie-Luise. 2008. ‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel: Orientalising the Nineteenth Century in Contemporary Fiction’, in Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Luisa Orza (eds.), *Negotiating Sexual Idioms: Image, Text, Performance*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi. 53-77.

- . 2014. 'Mining the Neo-Victorian Vein: Prospecting for Gold, Buried Treasure and Uncertain Metal'. In Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss (2014a): 21-37.